Urban nightmares and dystopias, or places of hope?

Urban Nightmares and Dystopias, or Places of Hope?

Gerry Mooney

Estates: An Intimate History
Lynsey Hanley, Granta Books, 2007

Urban Nightmares:
The Media, the Right and the Moral Panic over the City
Steve Macek, University of Minnesota Press, 2006

Back to 'Workhouse Social Welfare'?

English Housing Minister Caroline Flint's suggestion in February 2008 that unemployed council and housing association tenants (collectively termed 'social housing' tenants) must gain employment or lose their homes was widely criticised[1], or alternatively dismissed, as 'simply' an exercise in thinking 'outside the box', 'thinking the unthinkable' or 'blue skies thinking' – with reports also claiming that her Cabinet colleagues were keen to distance themselves from her. Flint's ideas were, nonetheless, only too indicative of a deep-seated way of thinking about poor and impoverished people that has an enduring legacy in the UK – and across much of the Western world. Her proposal to have council tenants sign 'commitment contracts' requiring them to seek work for the privilege of living in a council house smacks of successive generations of social welfare policy which, over the period of the past four hundred years or so – and certainly going back to the Elizabethan poor relief reforms – have sought to focus attention on those deemed to be 'deserving'.

On stating her position, Flint expressed some initial surprise that council tenants are more likely to be unemployed than other sections of the population and that poverty and unemployment have come to be associated largely, though by no means exclusively, with the council estate. More recently in July 2008, the Government in London launched the Youth Crime Action Plan for England and Wales which promises to further extend the targeting of 'anti-social' and 'problem' families and the parents of unruly children. Among the sanctions announced include possible eviction from council rented properties.

'The workless' council estate where 'benefit' and 'dependency' cultures endure, and in which crime and delinquency apparently flourish, has become a recurring story across swathes of television documentaries and dramas, popular fiction, travelogues and cinema[2]. But, more significantly, over the past decade the 'moral panic' that dominated the Tories' administrations has become increasingly central to New Labour's electoral and policy making rhetoric.[3] It is this which has provided the backdrop for Flint's assertions – and which helps to inform a range of more punitive government approaches to crime and indeed to increasing criminalisation.[4]

Territorial Stigmatisation

Flint is but one in a long and growing line of politicians, policy-makers, journalists and commentators who indulge in the popular pastime of territorial stigmatisation:

"Over the last two decades the gap between these worst estates and the rest of the country has grown... It shames us as a nation, it wastes lives and we all have to pay the costs of dependency and social division."
Tony Blair, 1998[5]

"The truth is that council housing is a living tomb. You dare not give up the house because you might never get another, but staying is to be trapped in a ghetto of both place and mind."
Will Hutton, 2007[8]

"...there are thousands of people across Britain eking out lives...marked by violence, educational underachievement, unemployment, sickness and disease.... At the heart of almost every thriving city in Britain lies a second city, hidden from visitors' eyes."
Amelia Hill, 2003[9]

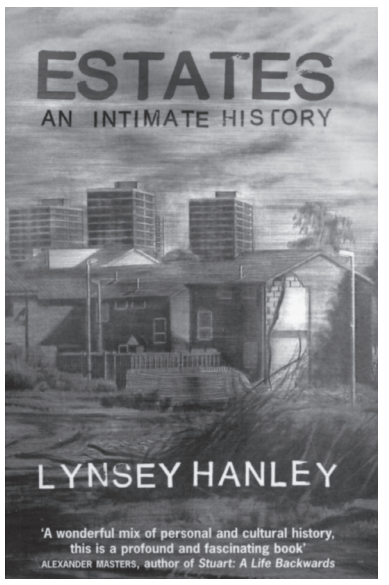
"Ghettos of the workless and the hopeless."
Polly Toynbee, 1998[10]

In these brief extracts there is a shared view across the mainstream political spectrum of the council estate as a place of 'worklessness', 'benefit dependency'[11], 'anti-social behaviour' and 'moral decline' – of hopelessness and despair. These are the kinds of locales increasingly identified by politicians and policy advisors as places where moral breakdown is translated into social breakdown.[12]

This is nothing less than an antipathy to working class cultures and to working class life, an antipathy which is in many respects not that dissimilar from the anti-working class hatred that is central to 'underclass' ideologies.[13] Such ideologies construct the impoverished poor as a group cut-off from 'normality', as the authors of their own misfortune, evidenced by claims about the disorganised, deviant and depraved lifestyles of those deemed to be part of such an underclass. Dress it up any way you wish, by all means use the term 'socially excluded' and there's no need to make reference to an 'underclass'. But there's no escaping that what we have in these brief comments is the continuing prevalence for a people and place stigmatisation that is shaped and influenced by decades of conservative thinking around poverty and disadvantage. In this approach structural factors such as class, racism and state oppression are completely neglected in favour of an attack and demonisation of public welfare as a major factor that underpins the reproduction of poverty, family dysfunctionality and which contributes to wider issues of law and order, community fragmentation and breakdown. We find ourselves in a position now, once again, of having to rebut such ideas and discourses, to reject victim blaming and individualist understandings wherever they emerge.

'Nightmares', 'Dystopias' and Moral Panics

While the spectre of the council estate plays an important symbolic role in such representations and discourses, the city or the 'urban' is an ever present backdrop. In other significant ways this also echoes a long history of anti-urban sentiment which together with anti-poor discourses have come to be entangled in different and complex ways to construct particular locales as dystopian and pathological. Steve Macek's *'Urban Nightmares: The Media, the Right and the Moral Panic over the City'*, provides a detailed and comprehensive account of the ways in which a climate of fear and hostility to the city has been part of popular imaginings in the United States over the past two decades. In particular, he is concerned with the ways in which conservatives (including journalists in leading US newspapers) have been successful in constructing and representing "the nation's cities as violent and out of control, as populated by murderers, muggers, drug addicts and lowlifes, as places where the rules of normal, decent behaviour no longer apply".[14] Such sentiments have been further articulated, as emphasised, by a complicit mass media and by Hollywood to conjure up a vision of another America wherein "apocalyptic social



decay, wanton violence and depravity"[15] became the staples of rolling news reportage, newspaper story backdrops and popular films. Macek argues that the effects of such imagery was to shock suburban America, which he claims was still influenced by the 1950s and 1960s ideals and imagery of 'traditional American family values'. The ensuing culture of fear around urban decay and disorder that both reflected and fuelled a new wave of anti-urbanism was to find policy outcomes that have become all too apparent on both sides of the Atlantic, lending support and legitimacy to "an expanded police state coupled with a stripped-down welfare apparatus".[16]

'Urban Nightmares' is a very readable chronicle of the moral panic over the urban poor and marginalised which has come to be the dominant story of US urban life in recent times. All the familiar ingredients of an underclass ideology are to be found in this pervasive brew: moral breakdown, flawed lifestyles, dysfunctional families, violence and welfare dependency. Such ways of thinking were to find infamous expression in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, as part of a concerted effort by conservative politicians, city elites, property developers, and of course local law enforcement agencies, to blame explicit sections of New Orleans' impoverished residents for being contributors to 'their' own predicament.[17] Bubbling beneath the surface, race and the racial disparity of income was a key issue. However, as Macek argues, this was euphemized in different ways, for instance, 'the inner city' or even in the term, 'underclass':

"Such linguistic turns of phrase 'performed an important socio-psychological function for the white middle class in that it provides them with a series of code words that permit the expression of deeply felt anti-black and Latino sentiment with little self-consciousness or embarrassment".[18]

In an evocatively entitled section which explores 'The Cinema of Suburban Paranoia', Macek neatly considers the important ways in which these visions of an urban nightmare influence mainstream US cinema. These sentiments are echoed in films such as *Batman* (1989), *Bonfire of the Vanities* (1990) *Grand Canyon* (1991), *Judgement Night* (1993) and *Seven* (1995), among many others. Here, urban violence, gang warfare and the stock story of apocalyptic urban social breakdown provide the backdrop. But if the racialised discourse is couched in other terms, on the blogosphere, web, and in video home entertainment systems, such sentiments are rarely hidden but given much more of a voice. Many video games (the *Grand Theft Auto* series or

Resident Evil for example) rely on stereotypical imagery of the urban or Latino gangster, for instance. These forms of entertainment not only reflect but also serve to reproduce anti-urban visions of social breakdown, anarchy and violence.

A Failure of American Liberalism?

The dominance of conservative and right-wing views circumscribing the city, disadvantage, and poverty, is accompanied for Macek by the collapse of US liberalism. In particular, the Clinton Presidency in the 1990s is held to be particularly culpable of surrendering to conservative ideologies, reflected in the 1994 'Crime Control Bill' and then in 1996 the 'Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act'. These two acts played to conservative-inspired fears of urban breakdown, dependency and worklessness. But the liberal surrender went beyond the Clinton administration, a 'victim-blaming discourse' gripped liberal thinking. This was reflected in a political and policy making panic around 'moral poverty' which in turn fed a language which spoke of 'criminogenic environments' and 'supercriminals' (or in the term favoured by right-wing criminologists: 'superpredators')[19] but which also deployed a range of 'biologically-derived' metaphors which worked to demonize teenage mothers and also unruly youth.

The emergence of something approaching a joint conservative-liberal consensus (reflected in the popularity of 'cultures of poverty' arguments, for example[20]) which was built on a particular story of urban chaos and disorder in the 'inner-city', contrasted with the assumed tranquillity and normality of suburban US life. All this reminds us of the close interconnections between the constructions of particular places and particular kinds of people and populations as problematic.

Particular Kinds of People in Particular Kinds of Places

"Play word association with the term 'council estate'. Estates mean alcoholism, drug addiction, relentless petty stupidity, a kind of stir-craziness induced by chronic poverty and the human mind caged by the rigid bars of class and learned incuriosity."[21] "...you only have to say the word 'estates' for someone to infer a vast amount of meaning from it. It's a bruise in the form of a word: it hits the nerves that register shame, disgust, fear and, very occasionally, fierce pride."[22]
Lynsey Hanley, 'Estates: An Intimate History'

Council estates have long been vilified, likewise estate residents have rarely been viewed in positive terms: 'sink estates', 'problem estates', 'deprived' and 'depraved' estates. As in the USA, over the past decade or so there has been a growing consensus among right and left-of-centre politicians, policy-makers and political commentators around council estates. Take the following from 'leftish' journalist and commentator Will Hutton in the aftermath of several teenage murders in South London in February 2007:

"It is not British civilisation that ails, the extravagant charge made by David Cameron last week. It is British council estates. We made them. Now we need to unmake them, doing whatever it takes. Or else expect ever more of what we witnessed last week."[23]

'Unmaking' council estates is also about *remaking* council estate tenants – in a fantasy mould of the suburban middle classes – without of course the material intent to achieve such a radical makeover. The view of council estates espoused by the likes of Hutton offers the kind of sweeping generalisations that council tenants have become only too used to hearing. Stereotypes abound, mobilising a similar kind of language and discourse that Macek highlights in his account of the right-wing's demonisation of the US inner city. But as Lynsey Hanley reminds us in her part social history, part memoir of growing up on the outer Birmingham Wood estate, 'Estates: An Intimate History', it wasn't always quite like this. Leaving aside for the moment that there are council estates and then there are council estates, with different histories, diverse populations, contrasting levels of investment and differing stories of mismanagement, it is important that we hold on to the understanding that council estates met an acute social need in inter-war and post-1945 Britain; a need that the private sector – then as much as now – is unable and unwilling to meet. Housing the poorest sections of the population was always a laudable aim – even if many of the pioneering generations of tenants in the higher quality council estates in inter-war Britain were hardly the poorest citizens. In the aftermath of World War II up to the 1970s, the public sector provided housing for almost half of the entire UK population, many living on the kinds of estates now the objects and subjects of middle-class sneering and vilification. Council estates were not always 'blots on the urban landscape'! Hanley shows that council estates in the 1950s and 1960s, while often falling short of policy making ideals, were far removed from the slum landlordism which characterised the private renting sectors. Cottage-style estates mushroomed, mimicking in various but rarely successful ways the ideals of the garden city movement of planned communities. But already in the 1950s 'concerns' were being voiced that council estates were characterised by monotonous architecture and, despite their initial wide social appeal, were increasingly single-class locales.

By the mid to late 1950s and reaching a peak in the 1960s and early 1970s, high-rise housing (together with a penchant among some construction firms and architects for 'deck-access' type housing, typified by Hulme in Manchester or Darnley in Glasgow) signalled the demise of council housing.

Under Thatcher and the Tories in the 1980s and 1990s, tenants' 'right to buy' the home they were living in served to deplete council housing stock, it also hastened the rise in property prices through encouraging market speculation. With remaining council housing stock concentrated in less well serviced areas with fewer employment opportunities, it also served to further isolate and stigmatize tenants, with remaining public sector provision seen as a residualised form of housing of the last resort for those who were not attractive propositions for market provision. This was closely followed in the late 1990s and 2000s by *en bloc* stock transfer of council housing ownership to privately registered landlords (some of them national companies), and the use of 'selective demolition' and compulsory purchase as a tool for further exploitation in the name of redevelopment. This represents the culmination of a long-term decline, underpinned by decades of a chronic lack of investment – indeed even disinvestment in council estates[24]. From their peak in the late 1970s housing nearly 50% of the population, by around 2004 this had declined to between 12% and 20% (although this is highly uneven geographically).

Hanley talks of two main public perceptions of the council estate: of a dream gone sour, where once a council house was a sign of a full stake in society, it is now a sign of stigma; and of a place to house those who will always be with us – the poor!

"You've got to put them somewhere, after all. Preferably somewhere a long way away from the rest of us; somewhere not very nice, so there is always that invisible stick to the backside, with the far-off prospect of escape to a better place as the tantalizing carrot."[25]

A Wall in the Head?

"To be working-class in Britain is also to have a wall in the head, and, since council housing has come to mean housing for the working class (and the non-working class), that wall exists unbroken throughout every estate in the land."[26]
Lynsey Hanley, 'Estates: An Intimate History'

At the core of Hanley's story is her description of the ways in which the monotony of the built environment, which characterises many of the council estates dotted around the UK, helps to create and reproduce what she terms a "wall in the head". Here we have the idea that council estate living is a state of mind, one typified by "invisible barriers" to self-improvement and knowledge – and to social mobility. Council estates supposedly work to "sap the spirit, suck out hope and ambition, and draw in apathy and nihilism."[27] This sense of exclusion from the wider world is vividly portrayed in Hanley's account of life on the Wood estate – and her 'escape' from it. Hanley is absolutely right to talk of a sense of exclusion and of alienation but she is on dangerous territory here – and territory that I fear she is not always successful in traversing. Hanley is well aware that council estates have diverse cultures and multiple histories: there is little sense here of the idea of 'the council tenant' as a monolithic grouping. While she avoids the patronising and moralising rhetoric, as well as the underclass-inspired thinking that flavours so much reportage of council estates. In talking of a 'wall in the head' or of council estate living as 'a state of mind' there is a tendency to indulge in a pop social-psychology of the kind that is increasingly common in social commentary and in policy-making discourses, such as 'positive thinking', that suggests all that council tenants need is the right attitude (being more aspirational!) and a more 'forward looking' frame of mind.

One of the Cutteslowe Walls: (*left*) standing, and (*right*) demolished.

Council estate living can be tough – especially when living on low incomes and in acute material poverty – but to suggest that there is a council estate frame of mind (my words not hers) implies something that is not quite the norm; whatever that may be. As we have seen, language is an important part of the battle around poverty, inequality and social justice that can legitimise and exaggerate already prefigured prejudices. This means that we need to be continually alert to the ways in which it can be used to 'other' particular groups.

Urban Apartheid UK Style

"Council estates are nothing to be scared of, unless you are frightened of inequality. They are a physical reminder that we live in a society that divides people up according to how much money they have to spend on shelter."[28]
Lynsey Hanley, 'Estates: An Intimate History'

Hanley recounts the infamous story of Cutteslowe Walls. Cutteslowe was an area of Oxford where adjoining council and private estates were built in the early 1930s to accommodate the growing population of the town, then prospering on the expansion of the first generation of motor factories. These two estates were hardly distinguishable but the developer behind the private estate thought differently and without planning permission constructed in 1934 two walls (topped with metal spikes) across the main road, pavements and gardens between the two estates to completely isolate the council tenants. This illegal wall stayed put until the late 1950s.

This was nothing less than an exercise in class segregation – class apartheid. Hanley is well aware that Britain is a class divided society – even if her understanding of class is somewhat vague and undeveloped. In other places it reads almost as a Weberian notion of status – for Weber, as a third category distinct from 'class' and 'power', 'status' was understood in relation to 'respect' and 'prestige': status groups were hierarchically arrayed on the basis of distinctive lifestyles, consumption patterns, and modes of conduct or action, and therefore the inconsistency between someone's social status and economic class (status inconsistency) might have strong effects on people's behaviour. She is clear that Thatcherism in the form of 'right to buy', lack of investment, and the ensuing residualisation of council estates has contributed to the problems of concentrated low income, crime and other social problems. Her solutions entail the redesign of council housing, giving tenants a greater say in the day-to-day running of their estates and building 'community' in the estates – though critics of council estates frequently complain that they have too much community, but of the wrong kind! But Hanley also calls for a complete rethinking of council housing; seeing it as an "integral part" of the national housing stock which she claims will help to remove

the negative associations and views that it is "second class" housing.

To return to the idea of a workhouse social policy: As New Labour becomes increasingly more punitive around benefit entitlements, with recently announced plans[29] to introduce what amounts to community service punishments for those unable to find work after two years on benefit – community jobs, such as tidying parks, at a rate of £1.70 per hour! And with council tenants now being told by Caroline Flint that their tenancy may depend on them taking up paid employment, policing, regulating and disciplining poor people is increasingly the order of the day.

Landscapes of Class

"..these entrenched quarters of misery have 'made a name' for themselves as repositories for all the urban ills of the age, places to be shunned, feared and deprecated. It matters little that the discourses of demonisation that have mushroomed about them often have only tenuous connections to the reality of everyday life in them. A pervading territorial stigma is firmly affixed upon the residents of such neighbourhoods of socioeconomic exile that adds its burden to the disrepute of poverty and the resurging prejudice against ethnic minorities and immigrants..."[30]
Loïc Wacquant, 'Urban Marginality in the Coming Millennium'

The "urban outcasts"[31] of the US inner city and UK council estate have become the stuff of parody, of ridicule but also of vicious class hatred. As such the class-basis of these discourses are somewhat neglected by both Macek and Hanley. The construction and representation of particular places as problems does not happen in isolation from the wider class relations which permeate society and which underpin right-wing and conservative ways of thinking (as well as shaping some of the 'left' of centre discourses highlighted here).

The idea of the 'ghetto poor'[32] or 'slum poor' has a long and pernicious history (for example in late nineteenth century middle class concerns with 'the rookeries' of London) and while the language might have changed – the sentiments and values which it carries are only too evident in the context of the neo-liberalism of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Such poor and disadvantaged groups are portrayed as recalcitrants, as in some ways less adaptable and 'conservative' in that they are unwilling to change to face new challenges.

The ways in which disadvantaged locales are constructed and represented often act as euphemisms for problem people. The use of such euphemisms reminds us again of the ways in which US liberals couched their embracing of conservative 'blame the victim' discourses in a range of coy terms. But hidden not so far beneath the surface is a pathological view of working class life. As Chris Haylett has forcefully argued:

"The issue then, is not so much the existence of working-class conditions (of hardship, exploitation and so on) as the particular ways in which they are problematised and the solutions attendant upon these ways of thinking. Put bluntly, where working-class identities and cultures and the processes through which they are constituted are not seen to warrant debate, target problems easily become targeted lives, little more than the adjuncts of rationalistic theory and policy-making. It would seem that this elision, practiced by politicians and theorists alike, is partly about a troubled approach to relationships between class and culture. Working-class cultures are positioned at the apex of those troubles, as problematic, in need and usually 'in receipt' but not capable of giving or teaching anything of worth to dominant centres of value (public space, political institutions, middle-class ways of being)."[33]

Right and *Below*: Campaign photographs from Defend Council Housing, which opposes privatisation of council housing and is campaigning for the fourth option – direct investment.

At least Hanley holds on to the idea that council estates can be places that can offer hope and they can be places of resistance. Indeed, if council housing were the uniformly appalling places they are thought to be, why have many tenants fought and voted against council stock transfer? Council housing has played a significant historic role in meeting the housing needs of millions of people in the UK. What is needed now is a vast investment in remaking council housing, not its complete and utter destruction – but this is also tied to a wider commitment to re-establishing welfare and social need as a right, not a punishment! This, of course, would have to include the reintroduction of the basic democratic mechanisms of local government that have also been eroded. As Macek shows in the context of the contemporary United States, free market policies have failed. In the face of the celebration of the market by New Labour, such 'solutions' are also failing here in the UK.

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Notes

1. Patrick Wintour 'Labour: if you want a house find a job', *The Guardian*, February 5, 2008; David Orr 'We can't make people homeless as well as jobless', *The Guardia*n, February 8, 2008;
2. See Charlie Johnstone and Gerry Mooney '*Problem* People, *Problem* Places? New Labour and Council Estates' in Rowland Atkinson and Gesa Helms (eds) 'Securing an Urban Renaissance', Policy Press, 2007.
3. Many benefits and social policies are more complicated than they used to be, having an array of eligibility criteria and conditions attached to them. Drug users risk benefit cuts : Jobcentre staff will be able to withhold cash and force claimants to attend treatment programmes, *The Observer*, Sunday July 20, 2008 http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2008/jul/20/drugspolicy.welfare?gusrc=rss&feed=uknews
4. The Blair government created 3,023 new criminal offences in nine-years from starting office in May 1997, one for almost every day it had been in power and twice the rate of the previous Tory administration. 'Blair's "frenzied law making": a new offence for every day spent in office', *The Independent*, Nigel Morris, Wednesday, 16 August 2006
5. Tony Blair in foreword to Social Exclusion Unit *Bringing Britain Together: A National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal*, London: HMSO, 1998: page 1.
6. Melanie Phillips 'Slums Are Not the Problem: People Are', *The Sunday Times*, September 20, 1998.
7. Tony Blair, Speech to the Scottish Labour Party Conference, February 24 2006.
8. Will Hutton, 'Open the gates and free people from Britain's ghettos', *The Observer*, February 18, 2007
9. Hill, A. 'Council Estate Decline Spawns New Underclass', *The Observer*, November 20, 2003.
10. Polly Toynbee 'The Estate They're In', *The Guardian*, September 15, 1998
11. The nature of paid employment today is that benefits workers are themselves are in receipt of benefits : In the face of mass privatisations of sections of the Department for Work and Pensions, particularly the functions of jobcentres, Mark Serwotka of The Public and Commercial Services union was reported in the Guardian as saying: "We have far too many members administering government benefits that they also have to claim just to scrape together a living." *The Guardian*, Tuesday February 17, 2004 http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2004/feb/17/uk.Whitehall
12. David Cameron, 'Fixing our Broken Society', Conservative Party, http://www.conservatives.com; July 7 2008; Iain Duncan Smith, 'Living, and dying, on welfare in Glasgow East', *Daily Telegraph*, July 13 2008.
13. See Chris Halyett 'Illegitimate subjects? Abject whites, neoliberal modernisation and middle-class multi-culturalism', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 19, 2001: pp.351-70.
14. Macek, p.viii.
15. Macek, p.xviii
16. Macek, p.65
17. Neil Smith, 'There's no such thing as a natural disaster', June 11, 2006; available at 'Understanding Katrina: perspectives from the social sciences', (SSRC Online Forum), http://www.understandingkatrina.ssrc.org
18. Macek, p.135-6
19. Macek, p.110
20. Macek, pp56-58
21. Hanley, p.7
22. Hanley, p.20
23. Will Hutton 'Open the gates and free people from Britain's ghettos', *The Observer*, February 18, 2007.
24. As Unison declared in 1999: the "Scottish Executive is budgeting for further real cuts in public investment in social housing", and "Past under-investment means there is a massive repairs backlog". http://www.unison-scotland.org.uk/response/ghousing.html
25. Hanley, p.11
26. Hanley, p.149
27. Hanley, p.4
28. Hanley, p.5
29. Department for Work and Pensions, *No One Written Off: Reforming Welfare to Reward Responsibility*, Cm 7368, July 2007, London: DWP.
30. Loïc Wacquant, 'Urban Marginality in the Coming Millennium', *Urban Studies*, 36, 10: 1639-1647, p. 1644.
31. See Loïc Wacquant, *Urban Outcasts*, Polity Press, 2008.
32. See Alan Gilbert, 'The Return of the Slum: Does Language Matter?', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 31, 4, 2007: 969-713
33. Chris Haylett, 'Culture, Class and Urban Policy: Reconsidering Equality', *Antipode*, 35, 1, 2003: 55-73, p. 57